World Journal of Islamic History and Civilization, 1 (4): 242-248, 2011
ISSN 2225-0883

Ibn Hazm on Christianity: An Analysis to His Religious Approaches

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Abstract: Ibn Hazm al-Zahiri stood out as a critical analyst of Christian scriptures, however without giving any justification (*ta'lil*). Thus, his analysis methodology is known as the al-Zahiri's Methodology. This paper seeks to introduce his methodology, analyze the approaches, his objections and critiques adopted by him in his study of Christianity. The interaction between Muslims and Christians in al-Andalus (Spain) stimulated Ibn Hazm to master Christianity and its scriptures. His book *al-Fasl* is an outcome of the continuous friction between Islam and Christianity in al-Andalus. *Kitab al-fasl fi al-milal wa al-ahwa wa al-nihal* continues to be considered a work of monumental significance in comparative religion, the first of its kind to systematically study of the religious doctrines of Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

Key words: Ibn Hazm % Al-Zahiri's Methodology % Inter-religious relation % Islam % Judaism % Christianity

INTRODUCTION

Abu Muhammad Ali ibn Ahmad ibn Said ibn Hazm also sometimes known as al-Andalusi al-Zahiri (994-1064) [1, 2] was a Spanish-born Arab theologian, philosopher and jurist whose most important work was a book on comparative religious history. Ibn Hazm was born in Cordova in 994 to a respected and affluent family, descendants of Persian émigrés who had converted from Christianity and resettled in Andalusia, Spain. His father, Ahmad, an erudite scholar and devout Muslim, served as a high functionary to al-Mansur and to his son and successor, al-Muzaffar, regents to caliph Hisham II of al-Andalusia. His father, who was chief minister at the Umayyad court, died when Ibn Hazm was 18 years old, during the violent political upheavals of the time. After a careful education in the usual legal and literary style of the time, Ibn Hazm entered active politics himself, being at various times vizier to reigning members of the Umayyad house, a fugitive in neighboring Andalusia state and a political prisoner [3].

At the age of 32 Ibn Hazm finally renounced political life and devoted himself wholeheartedly to scholarship, but his outspokenness in legal writings which attacked the jurists of the dominant Maliki rite led to efforts to silence him. The latter half of his life seems to have been spent on his family estates, writing and teaching informally those who sought him out. In fact the

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significance and the major contribution of Ibn Hazm, which he developed cannons for a proper and critical study of religion. At the same time he was a pioneer figure in comparative religion and the Imam of al-Zahiri's fiqh and his lasting impact on the development of that discipline.

As a jurist, Ibn Hazm was one of the strongest spokesmen for the Zahiri, or literalist, school of legal interpretation, in local opposition in Spain to the predominant Maliki's school [4]. This insistence upon a meticulous basis in the Qur'an and the Traditions for legal decisions naturally led Ibn Hazm to philology and a heightened consciousness of the importance of the Arabic language for Muslim. He was aware of Aristotelian logic but saw it as definitely a handmaiden to religion, to be used to reconcile the Qur'an and the Traditions of the Prophet on the rare occasions when these did not seem to agree on the surface. In term of characters, Ibn Hazm was a sensitive man, always favored frankness and mutual understanding, a moralist and confronted all the inconsistencies of mankind. He was passionate defender of the truth and tried to base all his theories on incontrovertible evidence.

At last Ibn Hazm tackles on the sciences of his predecessors, contemporaries and some of his successors. As discussed by A.G Chejne, in his writing *Ibn Hazm al-Andalusi wa Mawqifuhu min al Ulum*, [5] although Ibn Hazm's views on and his harsh criticism of the socio-religious system of his day were abhorrent the majority of the Muslims, who were committed to existing juridical-theological school, medieval bibliographical data on him is relatively abundant. Information about Ibn Hazm recorded by Hispano-Arabic and later, by Eastern authors is inadequate in many respects, but medieval sources do offer valuable insights into how the man and his ideas were viewed at that point in the intellectual History of Islam.

Ibn Hazm remained a controversial and outspoken figure, however and an assortment of his works were publicly burned by al-Mu'tadid in nearby Seville. His reputation survived intact and when he died at Manta Lisham in August 1064, he was already viewed as one of the greatest Muslim intellectuals of the age.

Ibn Hazm and His Study Toward Christianity: Ibn Hazm's study of religions is based on what may be called a textual, empirical and common sense methods. He analyzed religious data according to the rules of logic and authoritative scripture available in his period and engaged himself in disputation with the other religious traditions present in his time. His study on Christianity is based on the concept of common sense (sense perception), statements and argumentation by the authoritative text (the Gospels) and a comparative study with the belief concepts of the historical Christians sects; i.e. Arius, Bawls al-Shamshati, Macdunius [6].

According to Ibn Hazm none of these historical Christian sects discussed Trinity and equality of Jesus with God (Incarnations), nor they discussed the issues of the personality of God as the Father, Jesus as the Son and the Holy Ghost. Thus, the present concept of Christian theology has no basis from the authoritative written text (*la yasih lahum dalil- la min injilihim wa la min ghairihi min al-kitab*) [7].

In his study of Christianity, Ibn Hazm does not approach them in term of chronological sequence or in consideration of their geographical location. Rather, he takes main doctrine of the teaching and discussed their relation to or deviation from his view of the truth, sensibility and textual basis. Ibn Hazm accepts the theory of *naskh* (abrogation) in the Shariah, but he reject *bada'*. For him, abrogation implies a providential act of God and *bada'* implies the change of mind in God because of unknown and uncontrollable conditions and circumstances.

Ibn Hazm divides all of mankind's conception of reality and truth using division of sects and definitions of religious doctrine, analyzing them by using authoritative texts and sense of perception as basis of agreement or disagreement. His length of discussion, standard of refutation and the language while discussing all religious ideologies are based on differences and divergences from Islam. He affirms that Islam is the religion of truth and its truth-claim is based on textual basis, reason and sense perception. In his typology of religious traditions, Ibn Hazm starts from general errors in philosophies and ideologies and moves to the particular errors of major religious traditions, particularly Christianity and Judaism.

Ibn Hazm does not obviously give the details or highlight the background of the emergence of different Christian sects. He did not attempt a through exposition of their doctrinal disagreements and controversies, nor did he provide us with the history of ecumenical councils and causes of the emerging heresies. He also did not provide the sources of the Christian schisms. He mentioned directly the sects without highlighting where he obtained the sources.

Ibn Hazm argued Christianity on the skeptical ground and the irrational basis of the Christian doctrine as understood by the remaining Christian sects in his period,

arguing their doctrine on scriptural, rational and illogical grounds on the basis of those principle beliefs of the adherents. It seems from Ibn Hazm discussion regarding the classification of Christianity, the basic belief practices of the followers of Arius, Bawls al-Shamshati and Maqdunius were not anymore practiced by the Christians during his time. These historical Christians sects held that Jesus was a messenger and not God and they did not discuss anything about Trinity. The *al-Malkaniah, Nasturiah* and *al-Yakubiah* were the existing Christian sects during the time of Ibn Hazm, but in the present day these sects do not exist anymore.

Ibn Hazm approach in the study of Christianity can be characterized in a very critical and disputation spirit, despite he presented his view on Christianity in systematic discussion and logical forms. He sets forth the position of Christian belief as accurately as he understands it, records their argument, both religious and philosophical, then, rebut their argumentation one by one on common sense and from the textual basis. His critiques on Christianity rest on the premise that the scripture (the Bible), which is revealed by God, cannot be inconsistent and contradictory in content.

Book *Al-Milal Wa Al-Ahwa Wa Al-Nihal*: The book was translated as “The Book of Sects and Creeds”, written by Ibn Hazm (994-1064), is a non-polemical study of religious communities and philosophies that had existed up to his time, considered to be the first systematic study of religion. A French translation of the book by Gimaret, Monnot and Jolivet was sponsored by UNESCO (*Livre des religions et des sects.* Peeters: 1986, 1993) [8, 9]. The richness and originality of Ibn Hazm’s philosophical and theological thought is manifested in this major works. The Kitab al-Milal wa al-Nihal (The Book of Sects and Creeds), a monumental work, presents the doctrinal points of view of all the religions and philosophies which existed up to his time [10]. He was a very subtle author who often spoke indirectly by means of symbols. He preferred his own personal vocabulary to the traditional one. For this reason, his position is hard to determine. It may well be that ideological considerations led him to speak indirectly; he perhaps assumed those familiar with the symbols would be able to unravel his elusive ideas.

Ibn Hazm’s Critiques on Christianity: The whole objection and critiques made by Ibn Hazm on Christianity lies on the theory of Trinity. Ibn Hazm refused Christianity today to be a monotheistic religion and accused Christian to be Polytheistic (*Mushrik*). Though the Christian belief in the absolute unity of God, but at the same time they worship the images portrayed in their church; such the images of Jesus, the image of Mary, the Cross, the images of Gabriel, image of Michel and others. To Ibn Hazm it is a form of idolatry prayer (*Ibadat al-Authan*) but Christians claimed that they are not idol worshippers. At the same time, they even fast (*yasumun laha tadayyunan*) for the sake of the idols. For him, what they are doing in their prayer is contradicted to the *shariah* and the teaching of Jesus himself.

To Ibn Hazm the belief of three element: Father, Son and Holy Spirit is sort of thinking is sheer folly and confusing since if the three are one and the same, then what sense is there in calling the first as “Father”, the second as “Son” and the third as “Holy Spirit”. Even the new Testament contradict this understanding by quoting Jesus as saying: “I will be seated on the right hand of my father” (Mt. 24:36) on one occasion and on another verse said: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the ‘Son’, but the ‘Father’ only, (Hab. 1:13)”.

He also refuses some Christian claim that in Latin the “knowledge” of the knower is also called his “son”. That, however, is not sustainable because the New Testament was not originally written in Latin. The original languages of the Old and New Testament were Hebrew and Aramaic.

Thus Ibn Hazm claimed that he never found any direct or clear statement in the Christian scriptures that might support the doctrine of the Trinity. The divinity of Jesus and doctrine of the Trinity have been contrived by the elders of the church without any scriptural basis and other followed them blindly and uncritically. Ibn Hazm argued that the Christian lack of consistency and coherence in respect to the doctrine of Trinity. They failed to provide any dependable evidence from the scripture and rationality on their claim. Thus, Ibn Hazm’s arguments, objection and critiques o the concept of Trinity are based on scriptural and rational basis.

Ibn Hazm’s Critique on Christian Scriptures: Ibn Hazm’s critique of the New Testament is a running commentary on selected problematic passages and narratives in the four Gospels. That is why he did not start his commentaries from the first chapter of the bible; rather from some of the passages that he took and refuted them in a more logical form. However, he did not limit himself to the narrative of one Gospel at a time.

In his critique, Ibn Hazm addresses himself to the question and the problem of the transmission of Jesus’s Bible. Interesting enough, in Ibn Hazm’s discussion, he

does not question so much of the sources, authorship, gradual development and reduction of the gospels and to refute their identification with what the Qur'an terms as *al-Injil.* His main concern is to prove that neither the four gospels nor the other books of the New Testament are worthy of even being called authentic books of history due to their internal and mutual inconsistencies and contradictions, let alone their claim as scriptures and the inspired Word of God. To him, the authors of the gospels were neither the true apostles of Jesus, nor preservers of his original teachings and message. Instead, they had tampered with the true teachings of Jesus and forged the Gospels, mixing truth with falsehood. While accepting, for the sake of argument, these authors as apostles, eye-witnesses and inspired reporters, he shows them to be liars against Jesus and God.

While discussing the Gospels, he follows the traditional order of the Gospels, taking Matthew as the first and the most authentic and later going to Mark and Luke ending with John. Although he does not present these passages in parallel columns, like a western synopsis or a book of Gospels parallels, his treatment of the four gospels resembles a reflective synopsis. He does not refer to similar passages merely by mentioning their verse numbers and name of the gospel (as do traditional harmonies prepared for supportive proofs and harmonizing interpretations). Rather, he quotes the passages virtually in full and emphasizes the contradictions, divergences and variations in the text, content, context, ideas and purpose of the massage.

In Ghulam Haider exposition, Ibn Hazm's original attempts as a Muslim scholar is to deal with the problem of Christianity in such a manner as to preclude all further attempts at the harmonization of their mutual and internal inconsistencies and contradictions [7]. Ibn Hazm arranges and compiles all the narratives which appear to be dissimilar and later compares and contrasts them, highlighting those inconsistencies and contradictions. He added: "Ibn Hazm's criteria for scriptural critique are commonly sense of understanding, reasons, internal and mutual consistency and coherence, historical validity and conformity with the universal experience of revelation. His premises are not those of an agnostic or of a historicist, or even of an anti-religious, absolute rationalist".

Obviously, his principle rules of analysis and critique of the scripture are the same for all religious traditions which accept revelation as their basis. As noted, again, Ibn Hazm accepts that the four gospels are a running commentary which is not arranged under any topical or historical Jesus, his life, message and ministry as compiled by the founders of the Christian traditions. His purpose however is to prove that these gospels, as extant and that scriptures by the Christians, are not true and coherent reports on and about Jesus, nor revelation or scripture from God. He accepts the Christians belief in the New Testament as Word of God as a point of discussion and then, on historical, critical and scientific-rational grounds, proceeds to disprove their claims.

However, Ibn Hazm is rather equivocal whether the extant New Testament books are truly the words of their authors, or have also suffered corruption and alteration in their text and transmission during the period of general persecution. Even so, our analysis of his critique indicates that he does not regard the New Testament books representing the true history, teaching and original message of Jesus. Rather they represent exercises in distortion and alteration. Either their authors had intentionally confused the truth with falsehood or had fallen a prey to Jewish schemes. Ibn Hazm argues that Jesus gave them only one Gospel and not four gospels [11].

Ibn Hazm and Zahiri's Thought: He was a leading proponent of the Zahiri school of Islamic thought *(madhab)*, which argued that people are bound to obey only the law of God, in its literal sense (*zahir*), without restrictions, additions, or modifications. He denied the legitimacy of legal rulings based upon analogy (*qiyas*), principles of personal evaluation, or the consensus of a community of scholars [12]. Although he was originally a Shafie jurist, Ibn Hazm joined the Zahiri school and brought to it a systematic structure of logic. He created a Zahiri grammar for use in interpreting sacred texts, which specifically eliminated the ambiguities used by grammarians to explain certain syntactical forms. Ibn Hazm considered deductive reasoning appropriate only for reflecting on knowledge gained from revelation and sense data, but not for seeking out new truths in law and religion. He maintained that language by itself provided everything necessary for the understanding of its content and that God, who revealed the Qur'an in clear *(mubin)* Arabic, had used the language to say precisely what He meant. Each verse was to be understood in its immediate and general sense; when God wanted a verse to have a specific meaning, an indication *(dalil)* was given, either in the same verse or in a reference from another verse, signifying that the meaning was to be restricted. In a case where two meanings were possible, such as an imperative verb which could be interpreted either as a command or as a suggestion, the correct meaning of a Quranic text could

be determined by referring to prophetic tradition (*hadith*) which had been verified as authentic. He criticized Islamic theologians, philosophers and mystics for raising questions about revealed truths and resolving them by purely human means.

Accordingly, he classified Quranic verses in three categories: a) those verses which need no other source to understand, b) those verses which can be understood in the light of other verses of the Qur'an, c) those verses which can be understood in the light of authentic *hadith* and authentic is one which has been narrated by most reliable and many narrators.

Ibn Hazm's in the religious sciences must has been important influence to his ethical perceptions. In this case, too, he recognizes nothing but the written evidence as basis. In this field, Ibn Hazm dismisses any analogy form, be it derived either from the basis of prior sentences, or from empirical facts. His drive for synthesis leads him to demonstrate the harmony of all the Quranic and prophetic texts through the application of Zahiri principles [13].

Ibn Hazm carries on the idea of the Zahirite School in so far as he aims at asserting a new methodology in the field of (*ijtihad*), namely the Zahirite methodology. He treats and judges questions of religious belief from exactly the same point of view as the school to which he belonged in matters of *fiqh* viewed and questions of religious. The system of Ibn Hazm's dogmatic is entirely consistent with his *fiqh*. Until his time no attempt had been made to established Zahirite dogmatic.

Somehow, in the period of Ibn Hazm, his method did not seem to be succeed in asserting his dogmatic within the Zahirite School. Even later, the attitude towards dogmatic controversies remained completely inconsequential as a qualification for a theologian to be recognized as an adherent of the Zahirite School. Ibn Hazm is neither a naturalist nor a mystic, nor is he an absolute rationalist. He is also well aware of the limits of reason. To Ibn Hazm, it is not only Islamic Law (*Shariah*) and it's prescriptions that remain unquestioned by reason; indeed all law (divine laws of all religious traditions) fall in the same category [11].

To conclude, in his statement of religious ideas and religious traditions, Ibn Hazm makes reason, textual evidence and sense perception as the main criteria of his religious discussion. Ibn Hazm's study of the religious history of mankind is based on method of scientific, logic and textual. He believes that the true religionist is the seeker of the truth and reality. To find the truth in religion is to make life appropriate with God's willingness. For instance, his reliance on analysis of textual material, or exegesis conformed to his Zahirite beliefs and was used profusely whether he disputes Jews, Christians, or co-religionists. He used his extensive knowledge of Jewish and Christian religious writings as a great weapon quoting the Old and New Testament, Talmud, the act of Martyrs, liturgies and others. As a result, his work constitutes one of the most original and important monuments of Muslim thought.

His Work and Style on Comparative Study: Ibn Hazm is also famous for his great work, the *Al-Fasl fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa wa al-Nihal*. He offers a critical survey of different systems of philosophical thought in relation to religious beliefs among the skeptics, Peripatetics, Brahmans, Zoroastrians and other dualists, Jews and Christians. Ibn Hazm's line of argumentation can be appreciated fully only through reading of this book. This book written in the form of questions and answer, illustrates the scope and nature of his controversies. Using the examination of these religions to establish the preeminence of Islam, he also attacks all the Muslim theologians, the Mutazilah and the Ashariyah in particular, along with the philosophers and mystics. His main objection is that each of them raises questions about the revealed text only to resolve them by purely human means. Ibn Hazm does not deny recourse to reason, since the Qur'an itself invites reflection, but this reflection must be limited to two givens, revelation and sense data, since the so called principles of reason are in fact derived entirely from immediate sense experience. Thus reason is not a faculty for independent research, much less for discovery.

The work of Ibn Hazm are characterized by a combative spirit and revealed his vast erudition and understanding of given issue. His systematic method of disputation leads directly to the point under discussion. First; he sets forth position of his opponents as faithfully as he understand them and then he proceeds to dissect and refute them with the aid of relevant information drawn from Islamic or non Islamic sources, depending on the nature of the subjects.

Thus the application of the firs principle of reason and logical rules to the analysis of religious doctrine is the first scientific operation one performs to discern the validity and authenticity of any truth-claim of a religious tradition.

In term of presentation, he directly proceeds to the main points, recording the arguments of the opponents and then refutes them one by one, providing proofs based on logic and religious texts. Robert Brunschivig wrote:

"Ibn Hazm's contribution to philosophical sciences and to acknowledge his thought and approach which have been labeled by Orientalist as 'excess of as extreme systematization that is willfully aggressive' [14].

Somehow, his words expression affects much of the dignity from his presentations. However, we should not detract from the merit of his expositions, which are often logical and reasonable. Reading his argumentation, one is able to detect an extraordinary and disciplined mind immersed in controversies with rather uncouth and ignorant people- at least, this how he makes them appear.

His works tackles the question of faith in similar manner, displaying remarkable consistency and allowing dispensations for those unable to ascertain proofs by themselves. Ibn Hazm also tackles the problem of relationship between philosophy and revelation by insisting that with some qualifications they are in complete harmony and without contradictions. In so doing, he allows ample room for rationalists to reflect and ponder on the realities of things on the basis of proofs, believing that the truth can be derived at on the basis of demonstrations and proofs as well as on the basis of the *dalil* (guide) of the holy texts.

Ibn Hazm maintains that in the proper study of the scriptures, it is necessary to compare and contrast their contents as they are interpreted and carried out by their followers. To comprehend them properly, it is necessary to master the relevant languages as well as to interact with those who command expertise in such text.

With respect to the dialogues with other religious traditions, one must recognize the fact of different interpretations of the scriptures and hence the different denominations and sects of the major religious traditions. Ibn Hazm studies not only the mainstream orthodox positions of major religious traditions, but also their histories in terms of sects and main differences in belief and creeds. In his comparative study he consults part of the scriptures that provided the ground for differing interpretations and the basis for differing beliefs.

CONCLUSION

Ibn Hazm's study on Christianity is far from racial, cultural or religious prejudices. His methodology seems to be different from the case of a large number of modern Western scholars. His study is objectives, academic in approaches, critical in argumentation and debatable. These are reason why his study and approach have been adopted by some contemporary Muslim scholars such as Ahmad Deedat, Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, Sayyid Hossain Nasr, Sayyid Maudoodi and lately Muhammad Zakir Naik.

Thus, his approaches of studying other religious especially Christianity is valued as one of the best methodologies, which we find nowadays that even Christian or others have misunderstood the religious teachings. Unfortunately, there are some Muslims who agree with the concept of "Unity of Religion" propagate by the Orientalist, by equalizing all religious and to his how could we unite to something that has deviated from its basic truth.

Zahiri's methodology on Christianity is set in conjunction with the Islamic spirit of human comradeship and mutual respect for fellow beings irrespective of their religious backgrounds. Thus, this methodology ascertain accurate and unbiased presentations of their religious concerned, applying therefore the contextual approach which includes textual and empirical studies, in which the western methodology seems to be failed in fulfilling the true needs of studying other religious.

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